

**From Controversy to Solution Public Series**

**San Diego's Great Balancing Act:  
Exploring Creative Recreational Choices for the Future**

**June 17, 2004**

**Panel Discussion**

**Kathy Garcia**

*You have designed parks and park systems for other cities in the U.S. How did you think parks in San Diego need to be designed to meet the needs of residents 50 years from now?*

The first thing that comes to mind is our location, Balboa Park. Public perception and how we use parks are consequences of the various phases of recreation throughout history. Phase one catered to the elite and consisted of unstructured recreation. The next phase was at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century during the reform movement and consisted of a growing trend towards structured recreation. During the Baby Boom another form emerged with the development of active sports fields and playgrounds. During the 1960's, the trend moved towards open space and greenbelts.

So, where are we going? There is not one particular direction. We need to promote active areas for a growing population interested in extreme activities as well as provide activities and leisure opportunities for an aging population. In general, we need to create more recreation. A start would be to look at past trends and build on them, creating a diversity of uses.

*Parks can have many uses and even throughout the course of a day those uses can change (such as pick up sports by day, strolling in the evening, and birthday parties on the weekends). How can San Diego retain as much park land as possible while providing for a variety of uses?*

Some fields cater to specific uses and are therefore utilized by a smaller demographic. Open space, on the other hand, is more flexible and provides space for a variety and relatively unlimited number of uses.

We need to look towards promoting dual purpose land and look at parks with a new perspective. We need to take a holistic approach and utilize the entire park system.

**Reint Reinders**

*Your job is to market San Diego's recreation resources not only to tourists, but also to the people who live there. What recreational opportunities are available to us beyond parks and open spaces? As a city what trends do we need to pay attention to so that San Diego continues to be a vibrant and exciting place to live and play?*

Around 26 million people visit San Diego each year, making it the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> most visited destination in the U.S. Aside from parks and open space there are a variety of other recreational options accessible to us, such as Mission Bay, Balboa Park, and the beaches.

As for trends, both visitors and residents are interested in outdoor recreation as well as spending time with family and friends. As a result, San Diego continues to be a desirable destination because of its weather, lifestyle and great places.

*You have been to cities in other parts of the world. How do parks shape the image and values of their cities?*

According to a national park survey, San Diego was rated number 2 in the country by both visitors and residents as having the best park system. At times, it appears that we, San Diegans, are hard on ourselves about recreational choices even though we have a great park system.

*Facts:*

*Park and Recreation Department is responsible for:*

*36,970 acres of developed and undeveloped open space*

*25 miles of ocean and bay beaches*

*51 recreational centers*

*112 tennis courts*

*38 gymnasiums*

### **Kevin Reese**

*You are doing research on how the way we design our environments affects our health. You talk about activity-friendly environments. What is an "activity-friendly environment?"*

We are faced with a growing obesity problem. 64% of adults are overweight. In 2000, obesity cost us \$117 billion. There is growing evidence obesity is connected to the way we design our communities.

The elements of activity-friendly environments:

1. Proximity
2. Access
3. Mixed-use

The idea is to create communities where people can walk to work, school, and stores and interact with the community. The focus of active living is on walkable neighborhoods. Walkability exists when people live in compact, mixed use areas and have access to parks, open space and everyday resources. There needs to be desirable linkages between places to promote walkability, as well as a variety of transportation options.

*From your research, what have you discovered to be the causes of the epidemic of physically inactive lifestyles in our culture today?*

We are in the process of collecting data and so far our findings are not entirely conclusive. However, we are starting to see trends. People who tend to live in suburbs where there is a separation of land uses weigh more and are less active than those who live in mixed use urban areas. There is a possibility this is a result of a higher dependency on cars in the suburbs. Automobile centric policies create a reliance on cars and have changed our behavior.

*What can local government do to promote active living?*

Smart Growth policies help. Increases in mixed uses, transportation options, and access to resources are important.

The solution is to accomplish multiple goals. For example, increasing density creates a more pedestrian active community as well as provides greater accessibility to all facilities including more recreational options.

### **Ginny Barnes**

*You are a proponent of organized sports. From your perspective, why are they so important?*

I am a proponent of balanced activity. As for organized sports, schools have pulled back from supporting and funding recreational sports and other activity programs. Organized activities refer to sports, dance, yoga, crafts, softball, swimming, bridge, etc.

Activities are important in building personal skills and community. Being involved in recreational activities help create a network for people for all ages. This is especially beneficial in creating a better and more dynamic community.

*You have been involved in our parks and recreation system for many years. How can the Planning Department work with the Park and Recreation Department in ensuring that we continue to create and enjoy our parks and recreation system?*

It is important for the city to create a budget and delegate funds to maintain our parks. Funding the maintenance, as well as, applying it equally throughout the city is needed to achieve a success park system.

We can not let the value of our parks be jeopardized by the lack of funding.

### **Jim Peugh**

*As someone who is an avid bird watcher, how do you think we need to balance the need to protect the delicate habitat of open space with the desire by more people to enjoy those wilderness areas for recreation and education?*

Natural resource parks do not do well with other uses. There needs to be enough space to accommodate all use. We should protect the existing vacant space from development and set it aside from recreation and open space.

Parks are not frivolities, they are essential. The need for parks needs to be recognized as well as properly funded.

*What suggestions do you have for the public to get involved in creating the kinds of recreational opportunities they would like to see for San Diego as a whole?*

The Parks Department is very inclusive and accepts volunteers. Start an advocacy group and work towards better parks by being active. The more parks there are and the more people visit them, the more valuable they become.

### **Public Questions**

*What are the Planning Department and Park and Recreation doing to protect and restore parks and open space?*

(Peugh): Many neighborhoods do not have enough parks and increasing density compounds this problem. Smart Growth ideas are likable but it will be necessary for the City to take expensive land and convert it into parks.

(Barnes): Public awareness needs to be improved. The City should feature open spaces on their websites and market recreation facilities throughout the community. It would be beneficial to showcase underutilized parks to help promote preservation and get more people involved and interested.

*How does higher density improve health?*

(Reese): The research is new and not fully conclusive. However, there are trends which tie low density neighborhoods with a higher level of obesity, but we are not sure why. However, if you look at the design of these areas you can draw some conclusions. Low density neighborhoods usually require residents to

drive, while higher density neighborhoods are more pedestrian-friendly. Instead of driving to the store a person can walk. The idea is to increase the total accumulated hours of activity per day which include quick trips to the corner store.

*What about mental health, how does density help improve mental health?*

(Reese): Often people associate high density with New York City, but we are talking about areas like Hillcrest and mixed use developments where the majority of buildings are 2-4 stories tall. Both Smart Growth and New Urbanism show evidence as to the benefits of this type of density. There is a growing trend of people seeking social connections and face to face interaction. The streets with higher density and activity offer these connections.

*What are the political and environmental hurdles and what types of designs are out there to promote these objectives?*

(Garcia): Transit-oriented development is a design option. The more diversity we provide through design the more it will support:

- social interaction
- civic mindedness
- public spaces

San Diego is not one-size-fits-all. Some residents will prefer their backyard to a park but it is important to expand the range of opportunities. Both private and public recreation should be promoted.

*How do you go about protecting canyons and other open space?*

(Peugh): Lead a nature walk and introduce more people to the area. The more people know about the area, the better chance you have in securing it as open space. It is not the most professional way to preserve land but it is effective.

You can also try to have the land dedicated as a park.

(Garcia): Come to public, commission and council meetings and get on mailing lists.

*What is happening with established parks being converted to dog parks?*

(Barnes): At the Land Use and Housing meeting the City Council issued 4 or 5 park permits with an off-leash component. The historic reasoning behind dog parks was to make underutilized parks safer by enticing people to visit parks with their dogs.

Many dog parks are shared use parks. There have been steps to alleviate use conflicts by fencing off areas and creating use hours. Shared uses are great and compromises are necessary.

*What is being done to address senior recreational activities, such as urban parks for leisure and people watching?*

(Garcia): As the elderly population grows it is necessary to address and provide a variety of both passive and active forms of recreation. A start would be to redefine recreation and determine what parks and recreation mean to our entire population.

*Schools were able to get money with Prop MM. What does it take to get more money allocated to parks in inner city areas?*

(Garcia): Would you support a park bond? I think many of us here would be interested.

(Peugh): If we have a bond, impact fees need to be addressed.

## **Closing Statements**

### **Kathy Garcia**

There is a lot of work left to do. This is only the beginning in sorting out our recreational problems. It is important that political leadership follow in line with community leadership.

### **Reint Reinders**

It is important to promote joint uses. Joint uses provide good examples for solving these problems and promoting the City of Villages.

### **Kevin Reese**

In terms of physical activity and healthy living, we need sound research. We need to find out what contributes to unhealthful habits and devise creative solutions. I also agree we should redefine leisure and recreation to be more inclusive. Recreation can be as simple as walking to work. It is important to raise consciousness for better active living.

### **Ginny Barnes**

We need to take steps to convince the city council that recreation and parks are just as beneficial and necessary as police and fire. We need to promote public awareness. A park bond could be used as a visionary tool to promote park areas.

### **Jim Peugh**

When the Recreation Element is written, I hope it does not reflect the political reality of our City. Parks need to be accessible, people should not be forced to drive to be outside and recreate. If we intensify our density without addressing park accessibility it will be disastrous.

### **Gail Goldberg**

Smart Growth is not smart if we cannot produce the facilities.

### **Ellen Oppenheim**

At a meeting not too long ago it was recommended that the Department of Park and Recreation be renamed as the Department of Health and Well-being.